

RTF 323-1

Experimental Film: History and Aesthetics

Winter 2001

10-12 TuTh

119 Louis Hall

Chuck Kleinhans

office: 316 AMS, 491-2255; 491-7315

office hours 3-5 Tu and by appointment

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permission of instructor required. Students must attend first class. Prerequisite: undergrad majors--completion of 100 and 200 level requirements; nonmajors RTF 220 or senior standing; grads: permission of instructor.

An introduction to the history and aesthetics of the film avant garde from the 1920s in Europe to contemporary US work. Emphasis is on exploring the range of experimental film practice and developing critical and aesthetic concepts for discussing avant garde work. A thematic emphasis on US work of the 50s, 60s, and 70s will consider the parallels between the Beat Generation, Pop Art and the Counterculture and contemporaneous film work.

The course combines screenings, lectures, discussions, readings, and off campus screenings. Films are the main texts for the course. Films will be screened in class and cannot be seen at other times. Thus attendance is important and will help determine the grade. Assigned work includes 5 short reports on field work in Chicago's experimental film and video scene and adjoining art world, an in-class midterm and a final. The final can be either a take-home or in-class (undergrad option). Grad students will do additional reading and writing, including a take-home final.

Grad students will have an additional screening/discussion section that will meet several times during the quarter 9-10 on Tu or Th. All grads are expected to read :

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film*, second edition. The book is out of print; a copy will be on two hour revere.

James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton Univ. Press. The book is out of print; a copy will be on two hour reserve.

Required books (available at Norris Center Store)

Rees, A. L., *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London:British Film Institute, 1999) paperback

P. Adams Sitney, ed, *Film Culture Reader* (reprint by Cooper Square Press).

Tyler, Parker. *Underground Film: A Critical History* (DaCapo 1995) paperback

additional suggested reading (attend first class before purchase)

Charters, Ann. *The Portable Beat Reader* (Penguin/Viking, 1992)

week one

Thurs Jan 4

Stan Brakhage, *Mothlight* (Canyon) (1963, color, silent, 4 min.)

Marie Menken, *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (FMC) (c. 1960, color, sound, 4 min.)

Sallie Fuchs, *It Scares Me to Feel This Way* (Canyon) (1987, b&w 11 min)

Paul Sharits, *T,o,u,c,h,i,n,g* (FMC) (1968, sound, color, 12 min.)

week two

Tu Jan 9

read: (on electronic reserve)

Berger, John. "The Moment of Cubism," in Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays*. (2 hour reserve)

read: Tyler 1-31, Sitney 1-19

Sara Kathryn Arledge, *Introspection* (Canyon,) (1941, color, sound, 7 min.)

Maya Deren, *Mesches of the Afternoon* (NU) (1943, b&w, silent, 14 min.)

Brakhage, *Window Water Baby Moving* (NU) (1959, color, silent, 12 min.)

Ernie Gehr, *Serene Velocity* (FMC) (1970, 23 min, color)

Th Jan 11

read: (on electronic reserve)

Kirby, Michael. "The Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde," in Kirby, *The Art of Time*. 1969 (2 hour reserve)

Standish Lawder, *Runaway* (Canyon) (1969, b&w, 6 min.)

Jean Cocteau *Blood of a Poet* (NU) (c. 1930, France. silent c. 60 min.)

week three

Tu Jan 16

read Tyler, 32-71

Man Ray, *Retour à la Raison* (NU Video) (1923, b&w, silent, 3 min.)

Rene Clair, *Entr'acte* (NU) (1924, b&w, silent 14 min.)

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapitch, *Life and Death of 9413, A Hollywood Extra* (NU video) (1928, b&w, silent, 11 min.)

Luis Bunuel & Salvador Dali, Un Chien Andalou (An Andalousian Dog) (NU)
(1928, b&w silent, 16 min.)

Th Jan 18

Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, Maholy-Nagy Program (35 min MoMA)
Fernand Leger, Ballet Mechanique (MoMA)

week four

Tu Jan 23

Sitney 20-46

Maya Deren, Meshes of the Afternoon (NU) (1943/59, b&w, sound, 14 min.)

Maya Deren, At Land (NU) (1944, b&w, silent, 15 min)

Maya Deren, A Study in Choreography for the Camera (FMC, \$28) (1945, b&w silent, 4 min)

Maya Deren, Meditation on Violence (video) (1948. b&w, sound, 12 min.)

Th Jan 25

read: Sitney 47-92

Beatniks--commence additional reading!

Maya Deren, Ritual in Transfigured Time (video) (1945-6, b&w, silent, 15 min.)

Sidney Peterson, The Cage, (Canyon, \$45) (1947, b&w, sound, 25 min.)

James Broughton, The Bed (NU video) (1968, color, sound, 19 min.)

week five

Tu, Jan 30

midterm

Gunvor Nelson, My Name is Oona (Canyon, \$20) (1969, b&w, sound, 9.5 min)

Sidney Peterson, The Lead Shoes (Canyon, \$45) (1949, b&w, sound, 18 min.)

Th Feb 1

read: Tyler 72-131

Willard Maas, Image in the Snow (MoMA) (29 min b&w)

Jean Genet, Un Chant D'Amour (NY filmmakers Coop) (1950, 26 min.)

week six

Tu Feb 6

read (on e-reserve) Kenneth Rexroth, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century (NY: Seabury, 1973 [rpt. of 1971] chapter 9 (pp 136-160)
read: Sitney 136-172, Tyler 131-196

Sara Kathryn Arledge, What is a Man? (FMC) (1958. color, sound, 10 min.)

Robert Frank & Alfred Leslie, Pull My Daisy

Houston Museum of Fine art

Marian Luntz is the curator of film and video I think her number is 713-639-7530

Edward Bland, The Cry of Jazz (CK video, personal copy) (1959, b&w, sound, c. 20 min.)

Th Feb 8

read: Tyler to end

Shirley Clarke, The Connection (NU video) (1961)

week seven**Tu Feb 13**

read: Sitney 93-135, 330-368

Marie Menken, Hurry Hurry (FMC,) (3 min.)

Carolee Schneeman, Fuses (CK copy)

Jack Smith, Flaming Creatures (Canyon, \$125) (1963, b&w, sound, 45 min)

Th Feb 15

read: Sitney 305-329

Kenneth Anger, Scorpio Rising (CK (1964, color, sound, 29 min.)

Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wylie, Schmeerguntz (Canyon) (1966, b&w, sound, 15 min.)

Christopher MacLaine Beat (NY Filmmakers Coop) (6 min)

Christopher MacLaine The End (NY Filmmakers Coop) (35min)

week eight**Tu Feb 20**

read: Sitney 173-227, 274-304

Ron Rice, Senseless (\$40 NY Filmmakers Coop) 28 min

Ron Rice Chumlum (FMC) 26 min
Ron Rice Mexican Footage (FMC) 10 min.

Th Feb 22

New American Cinema: Scott Bartlett, (CK pers. copy) (1972, 60 min)
Scott Bartlett, 1970 (NU video)
Andy Warhol , Blow Job (MOMA) (1964, c. 41 min at 16 fps.)

week nine

Tu Feb 27

Peter Hutton, July '71 in San Francisco... (Canyon) (1971, 35 min.)
Peter Hutton, New York Portrait, Chapter One (Canyon) 1978-79, 16 min)
George Kuchar, Hold Me While I'm Naked (NU video)
Curt McDowell, The Weiners and Buns Musical, (Canyon, \$35) (1971, b&w, sound, 16 min.)

Th Mar 1

Stan Brakhage, 23rd Psalm Branch

Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, The Right Side of my Brain (CK pers copy) (c. 1984, 8mm/video, 30 min.)

Peggie Awash, Martinas' Playhouse

week ten

Tu Mar 6

exam questions handed out--screening for exam

Jim Benning, 8 1/2 x 10 (FMC) (33 min. 1974)
Stephanie Beroes, Debt Begins at 20 (Canyon) (1980 40 min.)
Susan Pitt Asparagus (Canyon) (1978, color, sound, 19 min.)

Th Mar 8

week eleven
read: Sitney 369-397, Sitney 228-274, 398-446

Bruce Baillie, Roslyn Romance (Is It Really True?) (Canyon) (1974, color, sound, 17 min.)
{Abigail Child The B side (FMC,) (38 min)}

Ernie Gehr, Shift (Canyon,) (1972-74, color, sound, 9 min.)

Final Exam

alll take home exams must be turned in by noon on Friday Mar 16. No late exams. If you do not meet this deadline you MUST take the in class exam.

Fri 16 Mar 12-2

Because the films screened are usually not available elsewhere, such as at regular video stores, it is very important to attend class. Students with repeated absences will probably find it difficult or impossible to complete the course. If you have problems attending, talk about it ASAP with the Prof.

Assignments. All students are required to turn in five reports of about 500-750 words on outside screening events. Two must be turned in before the midterm. The reports may be subjective or objective, concentrate on the overall experience or just one film/tape, etc. There will be a list of suitable screenings/events posted outside of Chuck's office and updates by e-mail. For undergrads, TWO parts this requirement can be partially fulfilled by attending some screenings that will begin the Mon evening grad section--for about the first hour additional work will be shown. Undergrads can attend this part, and have it count for additional screening; after that there will be screening/discussion/lecture just for the grad students. The purpose of these fieldwork assignments is to give students additional screenings and experiences in Chicago's avant garde art and media community. Undergrads turn in reports to TA; grads to Chuck. 25% of final grade for undergrads, 20% for grads.

Grad students have an additional assignment (15% of final grade), which is to do additional outside reading, equivalent to a book. Students must prepare a 2-3 page set of notes, questions, or topics related to the outside reading (for distribution to the other students) (due 20 Nov. in class).

There are two Internet sites you might be interested in:

- a. The bulletin board experimental film discussion group Frameworks: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM . > For info on FrameWorks, contact Pip Chodorov at <PipChod@aol.com>.
- b. and the World Wide Web site: Flicker: <http://www.sirius.com/~sstark>

Books on reserve:

all of these are 3 day reserve (except those marked ***)

Battcock, Gregory, ed. *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology.* NY: E. P. Dutton, 1967.

***Berger, John. "The Moment of Cubism," in Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays.* (2 hour reserve)

Clarke, VĚvĚ, et. al., *The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume 1, part two, Chambers, 1942-47,* NY: Anthology Film Archives, 1988. [ISBN 0-911689-17-6]

Dwoskin, Stephen. *Film Is: The International Free Cinema.* Woodstock NY: Overlook Press, 1975.

Ehrenstein, David. *Film The Front Line,* 1984. Denver: Arden Press, 1984.

Gidal, Peter. *Materialist Film.* London: Routledge, 1989.

Hanhardt, John G., ed. *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema.* NY: American Federation of Arts, 1976.

James, David E. *Allegories Of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties.* Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1989.

***Kirby, Michael. "The Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde," in Kirby, *The Art of Time.* 1969 (2 hour reserve)

LeGrice, Malcolm. *Abstract Film and Beyond.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1977.

Macdonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers.* Berkeley: U of California, 1988.

Macdonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers.* Berkeley: U of California, 1992.

Macdonald, Scott. *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies.* Cambridge, Cambridge U.P. 1993.

Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971.* NY: Collier, 1972.

O'Pray, Michael, ed. *Andy Warhol: Film Factory.* London: British Film Institute, 1989.

Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film.* NY: E. P. Dutton, 1967.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Film: The Front Line*, 1983. Denver: Arden Press, 1983.

Rowe, Carol. *The Baudelairean Cinema: A Trend within the American Avant-Garde*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1982.

Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology*. NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976.

Schneemann, Carolee. *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings*. New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. *Film Culture Reader*. NY: Praeger, 1970.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*. Vol. 1. NY: New York U. P., 1975.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. NY: New York U. P., 1978.

Tyler, Parker. *Underground Film: A Critical History*. NY: Grove, 1969.

Vogel, Amos. *Film As A Subversive Art*. NY: Random House, 1974.

Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. NY: Dutton, 1970.

Exams. The midterm will count 30% of the final grade and consists of short answers of readings and screenings plus writing a short essay (in class) on a film to be shown in class. (25% for Grads) The final (35% of final grade) will be in two parts: writing an essay after seeing an unannounced film (about 40 min). The second part is over the entire course--screenings, readings, lectures and discussion.

Final grade formula:

undergrads--discussion 10%, five outside screening reports 25%; midterm 30%, final 35%. grads--discussion 10%, midterm 25%, five outside screening reports 20%; reading report 15%, final 30%.

How to get to the outside screenings (phone first!):

Chicago Filmmakers (312-384-5533; 1543 W. Division) Filmmakers office is based in the Wicker Park Area and is located at the intersection of Division, Milwaukee, and Ashland. However the screening sites vary--often at the Xoinx tea house on Lincoln ave, sometimes at the Chicago Cultural Center in the loop, and the Chicago Historical Society.

Film Center, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Columbus and Jackson, 443-3737. (behind the Museum) Drive: Outer Drive to Monroe, west to Columbus Drive, park on Columbus or Monroe St. garage (offers escort to car at night). El: exit at Jackson, east to Columbus (over the IC tracks). The school has a cafeteria and machines. Grant Park can be a fairly deserted area at night, if you park there, be alert. The Film Center is on the second floor)

Facets Multimedia. 1517 W. Fullerton. 281-4114. Drive: Outer Drive to Fullerton, west to Facets. Or Ridge to Ashland, Ashland to Fullerton, east one block. El/bus: exit at Fullerton. Take Fullerton bus West. This is a gentrifying neighborhood, with a few restaurants, coffee shops and bars, mostly on Fullerton, but if you go back east to Halsted/Lincoln/Fullerton there are a lot of live music bars, restaurants, etc. Note: Facets is notorious for having the worst projection in Chicago; expect anything; you won't be too surprised (but everyone in the media community has horror stories). They do have an outstanding selection of video tapes for rental/sale--lots of European films, etc. One of the very best video rental places in the country.

The Chicago Underground Film Festival is screening from time to time in the area, often in Wicker Park bars/coffeehouses. The Chicago Underground Film Festival <http://www.cuff.org> 773-327-FILM

Some other venues may be announced; the Chicago International Film Festival, and the Chicago Lesbian and Gay Festival will all take place this fall; updated information will be posted outside Chuck's office.

For the first assignment, students may choose either the current show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (near north, off Michigan Ave.) or the galleries of 20th Century painting at the Art Institute (Michigan at Adams). Free Tuesday.

Experimental Film: Concepts for Analysis

The films we'll be looking at vary significantly from the usual dramatic narrative and documentary modes. Here are some concepts that can help you experience and analyze them.

Theme, rather than story, is often the unifying structural factor. "Theme" can be a recurring visual motif or can reside in the conceptual content of related images. MOTHLIGHT has a beginning, middle, and end, but no narrative. WAVELENGTH has a few human incidents, but that story is not very significant for the whole work.

When there is a story, it is often told with an interior or psychological logic rather than a "realistic" plot (MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, The seashell and the clergyman, ANDALUSIAN DOG).

The link between images is usually associational rather than descriptive or discursive. (REPORT, WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING) The logic of image relationships is based on content rather than chronology--that is, the logic of dream and poetry. (BRIDGES GO ROUND)

Little attempt is made to preserve the illusion of real time or real space. The expressive rearrangement of actual space and time is the norm. (ANALOGIES) Or, real time and space can be used to break from the conventions of Hollywood or "realist" presentation. (JEANNE DIELMAN) Often the experimental film generates a new time-space context of its own.

Frequently, technical or abstract elements of the medium such as camera movement, zooming, focus, cutting rhythm, direction of object movement, rate of object movement, color, shape, texture, superimposition are exploited as primary compositional elements, with the image content, or "meaning," being of secondary importance. This is the reverse of narrative film practice. (WAVELENGTH, FUJI)

The relation between sound and image tends to be based more often on analogy or contrast or contradiction than on reality. (SCORPIO RISING)

The statement made or the vision presented is most often the personal one of an individual artist working directly in the medium, rather than supervising a group of hired technicians. Often the "voice" used is the personal one we find in lyric poetry: we sense the maker is speaking directly to us rather than through a "third person" or dramatic narration (WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Appreciation and understanding of the experimental film requires a different method of "reading." A mind set in the viewer akin to the one adopted in reading poetry or listening to music is usually most appropriate.

Often the maker seeks to change viewer consciousness or to operate on a different level of conscious/unconscious activity than is normal. Everyone has access to a range of different states of consciousness, experimental film often seeks access to one or several of those states.

While many experimental works clearly avoid the goal of "entertainment" this does not mean that they do not give pleasure. Often the pleasure is defined in a different way, however. Sometimes unpleasure is used as a deliberate element to affect the viewer (the sound track in WAVELENGTH).

The film artist is often trying to change viewer consciousness by breaking both formal expectations and content expectations. Taboo breaking content is frequently used to shock or surprise or provoke laughter. This can lead to new thought and new (aesthetic) experience. (This is one of the main arguments in Amos Vogel's book.)

Often the social environment depicted is one deliberately set to run against the expectations of "normal" middle class manners and values. (SCORPIO RISING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Sometimes the films are deliberately puzzling: sometimes there is a solution to the puzzle, but often there is not. On first viewing, it can be a mistake to try to "put it all together" right away because the duration of puzzlement may be something being used in a creative way. Similarly, trying to find exact meanings for symbols (as in Maya Deren's work) may limit your appreciation. The power of such symbols is often that they mean several things, or mean different things at different moments in the work.

With the above in mind, it will often be useful to ask yourself questions such as:

What is the main feeling or image that the film leaves in your mind? What is the overall mood of the film? How is that achieved? What meanings does it suggest?

What are the key images or symbols recurring in the film? Do they have a common element? Is there a thread connecting the associations set up in your mind?

On the technical/abstract level, what are the main recurrent motifs? How are they organized?

What's done with time? Is there an impression of chronological development? Is time broken up and rearranged? What effect does the use of time have on the overall image presented by the film?

What's done with space? Is space coherent in the film? Is it rearranged? What effect does the use of space have on the overall effect of the film?

What is done with the sound track (if there is one)? How are voice, sound, and music used in relation to each other and in relation to the image track?

What motivates or directs the changes from shot to shot, sequence to sequence? What patterns emerge in viewing?

Does the film have a structure? What defines this?

How does the film develop over time?

How does the film "educate" you to understand its aesthetics?